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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether minority group teachers working in urban settings were recommending teaching as a career to minority group young people. One hundred forty teachers in three urban school districts (Cincinnati, Ohio; Long Beach, California; and Seattle, Washington) were asked if and to whom they recommended teaching careers. They were also asked to reflect on why they chose to go into teaching and the characteristics required of a teacher. Findings included the following: (1) students of color are being discouraged from entering the profession, and that is a major impediment to minority students selecting teaching as a career; (2) affective attributes rather than cognitive attributes were seen as desirable in a teacher, such as enjoyment of children, patience, commitment, strength, and flexibility; (3) discouragement from teaching was based on views of career options that in many ways could not be substantiated in reality (the education required for teachers exceeds that of other professions such as doctors, lawyers, or engineers; education for a teaching degree is more than what is necessary for classroom teaching; and the average college graduate earns more than a teacher); and (4) most participants cited the encouragement of a significant person in their own life that led them into teaching. (JB)

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If Not You, Then Who?: Are Teachers of Color Recommending Teaching as a Profession?

ABSTRACT

Whether or not students of color are being recommended to the field of teaching could have a powerful effect on their career decisions, particularly if the influence comes from a person in authority of their own ethnic group. One hundred and forty teachers of color in three urban school districts: Cincinnati, Ohio, Long Beach, California, and Seattle, Washington, were asked if, and to whom, they recommend teaching careers. The major finding is that students of color are being discouraged from entering the profession; characteristics of a good teacher for the challenges of urban teaching are discussed.

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If Not You, Then Who?: Are Teachers of Color Recommending Teaching as a Profession?

June A. Gordon

The importance of gaining an insight into how teachers of color perceive their profession cannot be overestimated. Minority career choices grow out of these perceptions. If teachers of color have had a negative teacher education experience, and if they encountered racism during their training and/or if they did not receive support or respect for their views, they will have difficulty recommending teaching as a career to their kin and students. If these teachers did not receive adequate training in methods of working with a diverse student population or with a curriculum that reflected the perspectives of other cultures, and yet there remained an assumption that they would be able to work with all minority children due to racial identity, it would not be surprising to find that they do not recommend teaching to their students or to their children.

According to Ogbu (1990), a "crisis of confidence" in educational and economic institutions exists in the minority community. The crisis grows from communities of color questioning the relative benefits of public education for their children. Aware of the limitations on economic opportunity and of institutional racism, the community may not view schooling as an avenue to economic and social success. They may, in fact, see their own poor economic status as a result of a negative schooling

experience. When teachers are perceived as the causes of their failure, it is unlikely that parents will encourage their children to aspire to enter the field of teaching. Parents, adult kin, teachers, ministers and community professionals are all potential sources of influence on minority youth regarding their future career choices (Zerfoss & Shapiro, 1974). If these individuals lose faith in the usefulness of public education in shaping future employment opportunities for their children, they will discourage and dissuade their youth from continuing in education (Reyhner, 1982). It is this loss of faith in education, particularly as a career choice, that I wish to explore in this paper. If teachers of color are not recommending education as a profession, then why should children of color enter the field? Or as one African American male teacher stated who does recommend teaching, "These kids must know that they are needed to educate future generations. I tell them, 'if not you, then who?'" (59) [Authors note: The use of numbers alone in parentheses refers to a master list of informants]

Methodology.

This paper is a part of a larger research project which inquired, through the following six interview questions, into the reasons for the shortage of minority students entering colleges of education and hence the teaching profession (Gordon, 1992). The results of these questions brought a wealth of information which, if consolidated into one article, would lose integrity and depth. For this reason I am focusing on only one of the questions at this

time: **Do you recommend teaching to others? Why, why not?** The remaining five interview questions included:

One. Why do you think students of color are not going into teaching?

Two. Why did you select teaching as a career?

Four. Are teachers respected in your community? Has the image of teachers changed over time in your community?

Five. How can we attract and recruit more students of color into the field of teaching?

Six. What changes would you make in the teacher training experience to better prepare all teachers to work with students from diverse economic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds?

The responses to these questions have been and will be discussed in other articles (Gordon, 1994).

Over a two-year period I conducted face to face, semi-structured interviews with one hundred and forty teachers of color in three urban school districts: Cincinnati, Ohio, Seattle, Washington, and Long Beach, California. Teachers of color were selected as the most appropriate group from which to obtain these answers based on the following reasons:

They have selected teaching as a career;

They have completed a teacher education program;

They are working in the field, often in urban schools;

They are usually working with students of color who could choose teaching as a career; and

They represent strong views held within communities of color as to perceptions of teaching and teacher education.

The attempt to find teachers from different ethnic groups was intended to reveal important differences among so-called "minority teachers." Since all of the informants were self-identified as "minority" and were invited to be interviewed by their principals, I had no control over how many teachers from a particular group I would interview. While much ethnic group research is limited to one group (Keefe & Padilla, 1987; Stack, 1974; Duran, 1983), my reasoning held that there are important issues to be confronted that can only be heard when spoken from a variety of voices. The research which most approximates this approach is that of John Ogbu (1974).

The responses to the question, 'Do you recommend teaching as a career to your students or children?' varied considerably. Some individuals were embarrassed by the question, particularly if they had previously revealed their commitment to the profession in question #2 and yet now admitted that they did not recommend teaching. Of those who did recommend teaching to their students or children, many had reservations. It was not unusual to hear tentative responses such as, "yes, but...", qualifying the type of student to whom they would recommend teaching. Nevertheless, there were many teachers who clearly did not, and would not, point a student in the direction of teaching for their future career choice. In addition, there were those who were unable to answer the question, stating that either young people in general were not

interested in teaching, or that the students they taught were too young, or in too low of an academic track, to consider teaching.

It should not be surprising that teachers' reservations about recommending teaching careers to family and friends were intertwined with their own theories of who would make a good teacher. Some held strong beliefs that only the academic elite should teach; others advocated for the compassionate. The following responses reflect some of this confusion:

> Yes, I recommend but mostly to advanced placement." (41)

> Yes, but only to an idealist, with strong sensitivity to helping his fellowman. She needs strong ethics; needs to be highly organized, enthusiastic, disciplined. (40)

> I recommend only to a special type of person, one who has commitment, open, patient, selfless, and wants to transfer knowledge to others. (37)

> Yes, oh yes, but they're rare. I encourage the helpful ones, not the honor role students. They have to not take things personally; they have to love kids. You can't teach it, but you can make them aware of it. (61)

Some informants flatly did not recommend teaching due to their own personal upset with the profession. These teachers put it on the line:

No, I tell kids there are things more rewarding than teaching. There are so many obstacles to overcome, societal pressures. (55)

No, I recommend they get more money, like a computer analyst. I wouldn't tell kids to be a teacher. I only went in [to teaching] because I wanted to be a coach. (42)

No, I prepare them for the worst. I just hate it when people talk up teaching and say its rewarding; it's not rewarding. One day I felt so abused.... (97)

No, I do not recommend. My kids see how hard I work and they don't want to be like that. My daughter wants to be a writer or a doctor. My son, an architect or involved in sports. (74)

Others want students to broaden their horizons and look at a variety of options. They explained,

I don't specify teaching as a profession; I think they should find their own fulfillment. But I inspire them basically to succeed. (84)

I don't suggest a specific career, but I get them to look at the future, at what will be around for a job five years down the road. Many come to be interested in teaching. I have run across a few this year who are interested. (103)

No, elementary school is too early; kids are too young. I just stress staying in school. (72)

For some of the respondents the motivation was based on survival of their people, of providing positive role models and a nurturing environment in which children can be proud of who they are. Others expanded this positive portrayal into the needs of the dominant culture. One Native American woman laid out her priorities,

Yes [I recommend]. I want to educate others about Native Americans to give students an opportunity to see and learn from a sober Washington Indian. (77)

While this might seem crass to some, it was the basis for this highly qualified Native woman's (she had a law degree) entrance into the field of teaching.

A few, very few informants, actually had children entering the field, such as this proud woman,

My daughter is doing her student teaching here at [XX]. When they were young, my children would come to school with me, helped in my classes, doing bulletin board, etc. My husband tried to steer her away from teaching but she always wanted to be a teacher. She said 'mom, I think you're the best teacher I've known.' None of her (daughter) friends who are minorities are in teaching; there is a lot of peer pressure to go into something else. (53)

While commentators often claim that peer group pressure is the dominant determinant in career decisions for youth, negative

attitudes towards teaching came from all quadrants of society. It appeared that if a young person wanted to become a teacher and persisted in their goal, they had to be an exceptional individual. The battle against public opinion itself might qualify one for the profession.

Characteristics of a good teacher.

There is a great deal of confusion in the profession regarding the characteristics we should be looking for in our future teachers. Some teachers in the present study felt that only the most capable should be encouraged to teach while others thought that teaching had less to do with intelligence than it does with caring and helping. Still others saw leadership and inquisitiveness as essential ingredients. As I reviewed these qualities, it became clear that the majority of informants saw "affective" attributes as far more important in the selection and training of teachers than "cognitive" attributes. Desirable affective attributes included: enjoyment of children, patience, commitment, strength, and flexibility.

One of the main characteristics identified, as explained here, was the need to simply like working with kids.

> You have to like to work with students; they have to be leaders in their class. (20)

They have to like working with kids, helping kids. As a teacher you can identify potential good teachers, if you have a close relationship. As a coach, I have more of a chance to get to know students, more informally, so I can identify potential good teachers. (8)

Another characteristic frequently mentioned was "patience," which usually went along with "commitment." Informants commented,

Commitment and patience are primary; you also have to want to really help kids to learn and be successful. (89)

You have to like teaching, like kids and have patience. They can read your body language. Students will rise to a teacher's expectations. If negative, they'll respond. (87)

The importance of strength continued to be brought up in combination with a variety of assets. For instance,

A teacher needs to be gentle but firm; it requires a lot. You need a personality that can ignore a lot; you need to be well-rounded, interested in other fields. (54)

Another was more emphatic,

Let's be real, g.p.a. is not the criterion for good teaching. You need strong character and personality. (59)

Flexibility was a recurring attribute identified with good teachers. One informant suggested that all potential teachers be substitutes before they become certified. His comment,

> You have to be adept at adapting. Five to ten percent of teachers are absent across the USA on any day. Every teacher should substitute for a year in all schools. A successful sub can teach anything. (82)

Another stated, "Teaching is something that you learn on the job. Flexibility and caring are necessary." (95)

While exposure to multicultural, multilingual and multiclass situations were seen as desirable for future teachers, the informants had little hope that teacher education programs would be able to create the situation where such exposure and involvement would take place. Because of this, there was a consensus that some teachers really should not teach students from diverse backgrounds. The assumption was based on a fear that teachers who had no exposure to minorities or low-income students might do more harm than good. This was not a racist assumption. As demonstrated in other parts of this research (Gordon, 1992), many of the informants, themselves teachers of color, had not worked with low-income, predominantly minority, or urban children before. An African American male spoke candidly, "Not everyone should teach in the inner city." (85) Echoing this same note, a veteran teacher explained,

> Students need to decide what kind of community they want to teach in. Kids [young teachers] who don't want to work in the inner city shouldn't. (88)

A Latino informant revealed,

> Some people never will be able to teach minorities. It doesn't mean that they are racist, but they just can't relate to them. They need exposure and experience with people of color. (86)

He then related a story in which a Latina librarian had no clue how to work with African American students and, as a result, created tremendous hardship for them; he was constantly having to intervene on his students' behalf. As explained by one African-American male,

> You have to have experienced the advantages and disadvantages of life to understand the problems of these kids. If you were raised in a middle-class environment, you can't easily understand poverty. (104)

Another, who himself came from "the projects" contended, "We need street people who can teach street people, so that they can make another leap." (94) Reflecting on his own choice of careers, a coach spoke in a soft, moving voice about the importance of having the right people teach,

> I was prepared by my life. Seeing and experiencing the difficulties in life helps me relate to their lives. Their life is a lot like my life. (104)

Given the daily demands on inner city teachers, one respondent admitted to what was becoming obvious, Teachers haven't been aware enough of students to say who could be a teacher or not. (21)

Conclusion.

One of the most revealing findings in the overall research was that informants saw lack of encouragement as a major impediment to students of color in their selection of teaching as a career. As seen in the quotations, students are being discouraged on all sides from entering the field of teaching. Much of this discouragement was based on views of career options that in many ways could not be substantiated in reality. These perceptions as expressed in other parts of the research fed into the logic of not recommending students of color to the field of teaching. Some of these perceptions are as follows: the years of education required for teachers far exceeds that of other professions, such as doctors, lawyers or engineers; education for a teaching degree was more than what was necessary for classroom teaching; and, the average college graduate earns more than a teacher.

It is interesting that in response to interview Question Two, "Why did <u>you</u> select teaching as a career?", the most obvious factor leading to the choice of teaching was the influence of a special person in their lives, a family member, a friend, or a teacher. Yet when we consider this finding alongside the responses to the question, do you recommend teaching as a career, one wonders at what is happening. How can individuals who claim to be in the profession due to someone else's encouragement be so hesitant to provide that support for today's youth? Some may claim, as they do when questioned about the image of teachers in their community, that it is an issue of low status and a negative image of teachers.

But this holds little weight when so many of the informants state that they as individuals are personally respected. Where does the poor image of teaching come from? What is society if not a combination of agreements by individuals? Status is something that is ascribed; it is connected to the overall values of a society. Those same values contribute to teachers' inability to meet student needs; and the resultant problems with discipline intensify the discontent. Yes, we can say that the values of students are different than they were in the past, but such thinking points the finger of blame in the wrong direction. Children do not grow up in a vacuum; they are affected by the environment in which they are educated. If teachers do not recommend their life's work to their students, family, and friends, then who will?

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